

O'Loughlin, Thomas (2013) Blessing and breaking: a dissonance of action and interpretation in the Eucharistic Prayers of the Roman Rite. *Anaphora*, 7 (2). pp. 53-66. ISSN 1755-9790

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Blessing and Breaking: a Dissonance of Action and Interpretation in the Eucharistic Prayers of the Roman Rite

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If one asks a classroom of theological students who is blessed in a Eucharistic Prayer, the answer should come back loud and clear: God the Father. The question's formulation contains a hint as to the answer in the use of the interrogative pronoun: 'who.' However, for many people – particularly those long familiar with the Roman Rite – the logical question to ask is not 'who is blessed?' but 'what is blessed?'; and the answer would be 'the bread which the president intends to bless' (traditionally affirmed by canonists to be that which lay upon the corporal) or the wine in the cup / cups (again resting on the corporal).

In the latter view, the words of the presider are not an utterance of praise addressed to God but a formula by which the bread, and then the wine, is taken, blessed, broken and given. In a scholastic analysis these words are 'the form,' while the bread and wine are 'the matter,' which together constitute

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the reality of the eucharist 'confect' by the priest (and his action alone, independent of any community). Within this sequence of taking, blessing, breaking and giving, there is a single object, both grammatically and physically, for all four actions: the elements.

Since this understanding is so at variance with both the historical sources of the liturgy and the theological thrust of the Eucharistic Prayers used in contemporary Roman Catholicism, it is important both to note how this misinterpretation arose and how it is still perpetuated in the rubrics and manner of celebration today. It might at this point be suggested that this problem is only a matter of concern to Roman Catholics and some Anglicans, but I hope it is of larger interest to liturgists for several reasons.

First, it is a text-book case of how very small initial confusions in liturgical practice, left uncorrected, can over centuries spiral in their implications so that what starts as a peripheral matter moves to become the centre of attention – a case of the tail wagging the dog. Second, this has significance for ecumenical discussions, as often the inchoate survival of older approaches goes unacknowledged, and hence still causes dissention. Catholics in dialogue situations, for instance, are sometimes unaware that this is part of their problematic eucharistic inheritance and can fail to notice that this view is still asserting an influence on their thinking – and so it creates further dissonance. Lastly, given the promulgation in 2011 of a new translation by the Roman Catholic bishops of texts for eucharistic praying, some of these confusions are now, for the first time, plainly audible in actual worship.

The Origins of the Confusion

In the earliest period of formal anaphoras there was no institution narrative (Ligier 1973; McGowan 1999).

Nevertheless, from the time of its introduction it has exercised a fascination like no other element in the liturgy: here were the very words of Jesus being used with the same results. With these 'words of power' a momentous change occurred: the Christ became really present there on the altar and the sacrifice of Calvary took place. Little wonder, therefore, that piety soon saw in the anaphoras, and most especially in the words that echoed the Last Supper, the notion of the 'most dangerous prayer.' The use and effect of these 'words of power' implied the eucharist was not merely one more common prayer of the people, but the repetition of the *opus operatum* of the Christ. Their use was not an act of narration, nor was their repetition viewed as anamnesis, but as giving effect to a sequence of changes in the cosmos.

The first and foremost of these changes was that bread and wine were changed in their elemental reality into the body and blood of Jesus – to use a notion first found in Gregory of Nyssa (Srawley 1903, 141-52). For western Christians this view that the eucharist was encountering the presence of Jesus as a result of this work by a priest (*sacerdos*) – by definition one who had been given the power at ordination to use these words with effect – was formally affirmed by the Council of Trent in 1562 in canon 2 of session XXII, canon 2 (Denzinger and Schönmetzer 1976, n. 1752).

Indeed this view of these words would come to dominate all thinking about the eucharist either directly (among Catholics) or by reaction (among Protestants) for centuries. It would eventually evolve into the inter-ecclesial acrimony about the nature of the change effected and its causes – for example the debates about 'transubstantiation' (Goering 1991). It would also affect the liturgy in the rise of the cult of sacramental presence (Freestone 1917; Mitchell 1982), and become the basis of a spirituality of being present at the moment of the change,

and perhaps 'receiving' the result in 'holy communion' (Koernke 2004). This view is still widely prevalent within Catholicism, where it sits somewhat awkwardly alongside the very different perspective that came to prominence at the Second Vatican Council (1962-5).

To study the problem we need to begin by looking at the traditional Latin formula relating to the bread as it is found in the Roman Rite:

Qui pridie quam pateretur, accepit panem in sanctas, ac venerabiles manus suas, et elevatis oculis in coelum ad te Deum Patrem suum omnipotentem, tibi gratias agens, benedixit, fregit, deditque discipulis suis, dicens: Accipite, et manducate ex hoc omnes. Hoc est enim Corpus meum.

This formula is still in use today as Eucharistic Prayer I with just one change: at its conclusion is added: *quod pro vobis tradetur*. It is the manner in which these words were interpreted, both alone and in the context of the Canon, that contains the core of the problem.

Before proceeding further, however, we need to note several related points. First, while part of the linguistic problem in these words can be traced back to the variety of verbs used in table blessing in semitic languages in the time of Jesus (Bradshaw 1981, 11-16; 2002, 43-4; 2004, 8-9), pursuit of this line does not help us as that distinction had already passed into Greek by the time Mark composed his gospel. In Mark there is a careful balancing of *elogeō* (representing *berak*) used in one miracle story (6:41) with *eucharisteō* (representing *hodeh*) used in a parallel story (8:6) while both are used together in the Last Supper account (14:22 and 23). While the problem may have its ultimate source in these, de facto, synonyms, it was their use as dominical *ipsissima verba* that influenced the later liturgical understanding. Second, although these formulae had entered liturgical usage prior to the appearance of the Vulgate (later

fourth century), our understanding of the way they were interpreted is not helped by a pursuit of their forms in the *Vetus Latina*. For those who imagined that their utterance's object related to the eucharistic elements, the liturgical form was absolute, and its location in the scriptures was merely a study of their original context. In any such study they would have used the Vulgate and therefore the Vulgate text will be used here.

Within that larger text from the Roman Canon, two phrases can be seen to hold the key to the problem. The first is that used with the loaf: *tibi gratias agens, benedixit, fregit, deditque discipulis suis*. The second is that used over the cup: *tibi gratias agens, benedixit deditque discipulis suis*. How do these phrases relate to the Last Supper accounts that they explicitly seek to imitate?

In Mark's account we have these words used with the loaf (O'Loughlin, 2004): *accepit Iesus panem et benedicens fregit et dedit eis* (14:22); and for the cup: *et accepto calice gratias agens dedit eis* (14:23) – which combined balance 6:41 (*intuens in caelum benedixit et fregit panes et dedit discipulis*) and 8:6 (*accipiens septem panes gratias agens fregit et dabat discipulis*). Matthew's reworking closely follows Mark and this is reflected in the Vulgate, and so for the loaf we have: *accepit Iesus panem et benedixit ac fregit deditque discipulis* (26:26) and for the cup: *accipiens calicem gratias egit et dedit illis* (26:27) – with the terms balanced in 14:19 and 15:36. Luke has for the cup: *accepto calice gratias egit* (22:17) and then for the loaf: *accepto pane gratias egit et fregit et dedit* (22:19) – with *benedixit* used only in the case of other meals in 9:16 and 24:30. Lastly, Paul's text has: *et gratias agens fregit* (1 Cor. 11:24).

When we read these texts one after another – both the 'Last Supper' texts and those relating to the feeding miracles and Emmaus – it is clear that 'blessing' and 'giving thanks' refer to the same activity remembered as part of a form relating to the

meal practice of Jesus. He took the food item, he prayed to the Father, then he gave it to those with him at table. This is obvious in all the cases where parts of the verb *gratias agere* is used (Mark 8:6; 14:23; Matt. 15:26; 26:27; Luke 22:17; 22:19; and 1 Cor. 11:24). This is even more clear when a participle form of *benedicere* is used (Mark 14:22) as it implies that while blessing he did something to what he had taken: he broke it. So the possibility of confusion is restricted to finite forms of the verb whereby we could expect it to have a grammatical object (be that God or the loaf) as in Matt. 26:26.

Before moving on we should note one other point, the possibility of confusion would have been strengthened by the use of *ac*, rather than *et*, in Matt. 26:26 and Luke 24:30 (*benedixit ac fregit*). This usage, without any basis in Greek which uses *kai*, would have strengthened any Latin reader's sense that both verbs, *benedicere* and *frangere*, shared the same direct object. This use of *ac* rather than *et* would eventually, in 1969, have an influence on the Roman Rite.

The confusion arose because these two verbs – *eulogeo* / *benedicere* and *eucharistéo* / *gratias agere* – were not perceived as synonymous, but rather gospel variations to be integrated 'less anything be lost' (O'Loughlin 2010). So just as the liturgical institution narrative as a whole is a 'harmonized' form of the four scriptural accounts, so in this part of the narrative we have phrases using both verbs being repeated for both loaf and cup. We could describe this as pleonasm, tautology, or simple confusion, but such explanations do not spring to mind given the sacrality of the context. In such a crucial matter, each word is assumed to carry real meaning, and each is distinct and important in itself. The implication is a simple one: 'to give thanks' is one action – directed to God; 'to bless' is another – and has the loaf or cup as its object.

When exactly this reading of *benedicere* with a loaf / cup as its object took hold is not clear. It may, indeed, have occurred very early for the *Vetus Latina* of Luke 9:16 follows the Greek word order slavishly and reads *benedixit super illos* [the loaves] *et confregit* or *benedixit eos* [the loaves] *et confregit*. This reading is then followed by the Vulgate with *et benedixit illis et fregit*. (The actual force of the Greek text is seen in the NRSV: ‘he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them’ though the addition of a comma after ‘blessed’ would have added even greater clarity). However, the later reading of *benedixit* is explicitly seen in the early sixth-century form of the *Breviarius de Hierosolyma*, [A] 3 (O’Loughlin, 2012). Reporting on the church in Jerusalem which housed the cup of Last Supper reads: *et ille calix, quem benedixit Dominus et dedit discipulis suis bibere et ait: Hothis c est corpus meum et sanguis meus* (Weber 1965, 111) [‘and there is the cup, which the Lord blessed and gave to his disciples to drink and said: “This is my body and my blood”’].

In short, during most of its history the language of the Roman Canon has leaned towards a fundamentally mistaken understanding in its anamnesis of the Last Supper, shifting the focus of Jesus’ concern from God to material objects. There is abundant evidence that it has been understood in this mistaken way.

Collateral Evidence that the Object of ‘Blessing’ is the Loaf and Cup

That Jesus at the Last Supper was understood to bless the loaf and cup, and hence that the president at the eucharist does likewise in his stead, can be looked at under three headings.

The most obvious evidence is from the manner in which the Canon was used in Roman Catholic liturgy. Its significance is not simply the literal meaning of its words, but that combined with all the gestures and intonations that went to

make up a performance of the prayer. In the standard forms of the Tridentine altar missals we find the prayers laid out thus (the rubrics are placed in upper case):

... tibi gratias agens SIGNAT SUPER HOSTIAM
bene † dixit, fregit ...

and:

... tibi gratias agens SINISTRA TENENS CALICEM,
DEXTRA SIGNAT SUPER EUM bene † dixit
deditque ...

It is clear from this combination of words and actions that what the president is doing is blessing the elements. The rubric tells the priest that at the words 'he blessed,' he is to make the sign of the cross – the fundamental action for blessing any object in Roman Catholic practice – over 'the host' (on the use of this term for the bread object, see O'Loughlin 2004). This instruction to bless the material object before him, is repeated even more explicitly with the cup. Now he is told to hold the cup with his left hand, while with the right hand he makes the sign of the cross over it. Indeed, the exact moment of the gesture is prescribed by the insertion of the † (in red) in the middle of the word *benedixit* which therefore was being taken to mean 'he blessed it.' It was in this way that the rubricians interpreted the liturgy, and they trained priests to carry it out (Zualdi-Murphy 1961, 101-3).

Making a crossing gesture with the hand was (and still is today in Roman practice) the customary means by which a priest 'blesses' any other object – and for which the *Rituale* provided hundreds of formulae ranging from salt and eggs to flags, swords, and warships. Indeed, given the actual practice of blessing objects which involved making the sign of the cross over them, usually at the moment when a † was found in the text, it would be virtually inconceivable for a priest, or anyone able to see him (the words were recited in silence) and who

knew the words, to understand '*benedixit*' in the Eucharistic Prayer in any other way. Moreover, if these two actions of blessing (i.e. making a gesture with the hand) were not enough, there were twenty-three other signs of the cross during the Eucharistic Prayer – and most of these could be viewed as referring to blessing the loaf and cup.

The second strand of evidence comes from artists' representations of the Last Supper. Very often Jesus is shown holding a loaf with his left hand, while the right is represented in the act of blessing (and usually that hand is shown in the classic blessing-shape of the last two fingers held downwards). While not all artists chose to show this moment or imagined this moment in this way, a significant number did – and this reflects the material understanding of *benedixit*. My favourite example is '*The Last Supper*' by Pieter Pourbus (1524-84) in the cathedral in Bruges, but the image was a common one in illustrations in altar missals and on devotional images for popular consumption.

The third strand is, of course, the doctrinal formulation of the eucharist in terms of the change of the reality of the elements. This change was spoken of as 'consecration' – the elements were consecrated – and consecration of people, places, and objects was seen as variation on the notion of blessing. It was clear that the work of the priest was to consecrate bread and wine; and the word *benedixit* was taken as a reference to this action.

The Contemporary Situation

In the reformed Roman liturgy resulting from Vatican II the number of signs of the cross in the Canon (now referred to as 'Eucharistic Prayer I') was reduced from twenty five to one: this occurred at the beginning of the prayer: *et bene † dicas haec dona*

(significantly this was translated as 'bless these gifts' which is a further confirmation of how the notion of 'blessing' was understood). However, the problem of combining the words in the Institution Narrative remained such that it reads tautologically as '*tibi gratias agens benedixit*' regarding both loaf and cup. There was, however, possibly some acknowledgement of the problem by placing a comma between *benedixit* and *fregit* (regarding the loaf) and another between *benedixit* and *deditque* (in the case of the cup). Moreover, the translators of c.1970 were clearly aware of the problem in that their translation made the genuine focus of the prayer abundantly clear. They render it as: 'He gave you [Father] thanks and praise' when referring to the loaf, and 'Again he gave you [Father] thanks and praise' when referring to the cup.

The other Eucharistic Prayers in the 1969 Missal present a mixed bag. In Eucharistic Prayer III the same tautologous form was used as in Eucharistic Prayer I and again the early translators came to the rescue with, 'He took bread and gave you thanks and praise' and 'Again he gave you thanks and praise.' The problem was avoided entirely in Eucharistic Prayer II by use of these formulae: '*accepit panem et gratias agens fregit*' and '*iterum gratias agens dedit*' rendered as '... he took bread and gave you [Father] thanks. He broke the bread ...' – by splitting the phrase into two sentences they made its original meaning even more clear – and 'Again he gave you thanks and praise, gave' While in Eucharistic Prayer IV it is '*accepit panem, benedixit ac fregit*' – a form to which we have already referred and one open to all the misinterpretation of old Canon – and '*accipiens calicem ... gratias egit ...*' Again the translators sought to rescue the situation with: 'He took the bread, said the blessing, broke the bread' and 'He took the cup He gave you thanks, and giving the cup to his disciples, said: ... '

The situation now, with the 2011 translation, is arguably

even worse than in the period before the reform. This is because the prayers are now heard aloud in modern language and the actions of the president's hands are more visible than ever. Clearly, the new translators did not appreciate the problem because they have repeated the tautologous forms in their rendering of Eucharistic Prayers I and III. In the first prayer they have: 'giving you thanks, he said the blessing, broke the bread' and 'and once more giving you thanks, he said the blessing.' While for the third Eucharistic Prayer, the recent translators have used 'and, giving you thanks, he said the blessing' for both loaf and cup.

The immediate and ordinary impression of these statements is that 'giving thanks' and 'saying a blessing' are distinct activities. And if one is 'saying a blessing' then one is presumably blessing the food objects – for that is the ordinary meaning of getting a priest to say a blessing over some object or, indeed, the implication of a table grace: 'Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts (*tua dona*)' However, for the translators' complete confusion one has to look at their rendering of Eucharistic Prayer IV. For the loaf they have 'he took bread, blessed and broke it' where the sentence has only one clear meaning: the 'it' is the direct object of both 'blessing' and 'breaking.' They have been led astray, as indeed may have been their medieval forbears reading Matt. 26:26, by that troublesome little conjunction '*ac*'. Translating conjunctions, here and elsewhere, is not one of their strong points (O'Loughlin 2013).

Alas, these recent translators, and the Roman authorities who sanctioned it, were not aware – as churches that have prayed in living languages for centuries became aware through experience – that theological blunders in liturgical texts disseminate theological confusion: until the 1960s this was not a problem for Roman Catholics, and it is a pastoral concern they

seem slow to appreciate (O'Loughlin 2010a).

The Future

Drawing out clearly the action of the Christ – his offering of praise and thanks to the Father for all his goodness – is at the heart of all eucharology, and any action or set of words that obscure this are to be deprecated. In effect this means that the word *benedicere* (and its direct translations) needs to be set aside in the liturgy. It is too associated, at least in the ears of Catholics, with the blessing of animals, wedding rings, candles, and water to be an accurate representation of the action of the church, gathering in Christ, in praising the Father.

This was implicitly recognised by the translators of c. 1970; but that implicit recognition was clearly insufficient as demonstrated by recent efforts, and more significantly by their sanction by those in Rome. Any thorough reform, then, would remove the tautology in the Latin texts – it is the Latin text that is fundamentally at fault and the recent translation is merely a function of that confused text. The Latin text needs to be reformed by replacing every use of *benedicere* with *gratias agere* (Prayers I, III, IV). Eucharistic Prayer II can be taken as a model for what is needed. Then translators can, even if they like a style that calques Latin, render these texts without confusing those who hear them.

In addition, while the 1969 rite has only one sign of the cross over the gifts (and this usage can be found in all four of the principal Eucharistic Prayers), this still communicates a sense to those who see the action – now the whole gathering – that it is the gifts that are 'blessed': this perpetuates the problem. These hand gestures too need to be removed so that there is as little room as possible for any suggestion that the object of 'blessing' is the loaf and cup. Even then, Catholics are

still facing the catechetical task of making clear to themselves, against the backdrop of this confusing history, that the focus – ‘object’ would be an inappropriate word in this context – of all our eucharistic activity is the Father.

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